

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL SAYS INTERNET AIDS SPREAD OF DEMOCRACY

**By
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WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 -- As the greatest purveyor of news and information in history, the Internet transcends borders, unites people and empowers the spread of democracy, said Ambassador David A. Gross, U.S. coordinator for international communications and information policy in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs at the Department of State.

But, he added, some countries are attempting to use technology to suppress dissent. "The restriction today [on Internet access] is government created rather than geographically created or even economically created," Gross told a Washington audience at the American Enterprise Institute on April 11.

Gross said that governments universally claim to have a desire to want more Internet access for their people and that the United States is working bilaterally with governments around the world on creating an environment to promote the construction of infrastructure and access to information.

"Governments themselves are responsible for control of communications including the Internet within their borders," Gross said, "but with control comes responsibility." Legitimate government tools to control the Internet are the rule of law and a progressive regulatory environment, he said.

Regulating the intermediary, however, said Alan Davidson, Washington policy counsel for Internet search engine Google, removes due process.

Davidson said his company, like Microsoft, Yahoo! and Cisco, abides by censorship laws when operating in countries that require them to do so. Google blocks prohibited terms in China and the company does not allow e-mail or blogs that could be viewed as political protest. Yahoo! and Cisco provided the technology to Chinese authorities that identified and put behind bars Chinese journalist Shi Tao in 2005.

“The world is a better place when people have more access and more information,” said Davidson. In that way, the Internet has been a revolutionary force, he said, but targeting Internet service providers to enforce a country’s free speech restrictions raises concerns.

“The United States does a lot to foster the free flow of information,” Gross said. He cited the Global Internet Freedom Task Force, an initiative to work with governments, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector to maximize access to information and minimize efforts to block content, suppress political debate on the Internet or use Internet data to track and prosecute legitimate dissidents. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/sa/Archive/2006/Feb/15-989025.html>)).)

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